

## From an Oral Tradition to an Oral Literature Vicissitudes of Texts in Papiamentu (Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao)<sup>1</sup>

Aart G. Broek (Willemstad, Curaçao)

Just like any other society in the New World, Curaçao, Aruba and Bonaire boast a long tradition of texts which were handed down orally. Stories, songs, tales, proverbs, rhymes, riddles, jokes, aphorisms, (ritual) formulas, slogans, recipes and the like have come down to us from earlier centuries. Quite some of these texts had travelled seas, surviving the Middle Passage with their treasurers, and were adapted to local circumstances. Others originated on the islands or were adaptations of texts from elsewhere in the Americas or from Europe.

Only by the end of the last century do we find some rare attempts at recording texts from the oral tradition, such as Jesurun 1899. The scarcity of recordings will have to be interpreted as particular realisations of indifference or scorn,<sup>2</sup> but may also be indicative of the extent to which the oral tradition was still a living tradition round the turn of the century. The oral tradition seems to have been so much part of everyday life that one just did not think of it as something particularly interesting or something that needed recording and/or closer investigation. During the eight-day vigil held after the death of a person - the so-called 'ocho dia' - stories were told, songs sung and riddles propounded. All types of

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<sup>1</sup>This article is based on a paper presented at the IVth Interdisciplinary Congress of the Society of Caribbean Research: 'History an Histories of the Caribbean' in Berlin. Participation at the congress and research for this article was made possible by funds from the Commission of the European Communities (Brussels), for which I am most grateful. I also wish to express my appreciation to the Fundashon Pierre Lauffer (Curaçao) and the Departement van Ontwikkelingssamenwerking (Netherlands Antilles) for their cooperation and advice.

<sup>2</sup>This is particularly true of the *tambú* - the word refers to a drum as well as to the music, songs, dance and social gathering that go with it. The *tambú* - which has strong African links - was an important means to severely criticize the slave-holders, plantation life and everything related to this system, while the songs and dancing would often also have strong erotic undertones. After the abolition of slavery the *tambú* retained these functions. It was forbidden by law to organize or participate in *tambú* parties until far into this century (on which Juliana 1983 and Rosalia 1983). Especially these last twenty years the *tambú* has been subjected to rapid commercialization - yet retaining quite some of its critical stand - and has become essential to many a dance performance for both tourists and the local audience.

songs were handed down during pastime pleasures, especially at the end of the year, and during work such as digging ditches, working in the fields and while harvesting. Children are also known to have had their share as listeners in story-telling sessions in the early evening.

When in the first decades of this century the editor of the Roman Catholic weekly *La Cruz* at times asked its readers to contribute proverbs in Papiamentu, the local creole language, he would publish those that nicely corroborated - or at least did not defy - particular Roman Catholic moral principles. Willem E. Kroon (1886-1949), the author of half a dozen thesis-novels in Papiamentu, would extensively deploy local proverbs for the same reason. His novel *Castigo di un abuso* (*Castigation of an Abuse* 29/30]), to give but one example, abounds with proverbs to bring home his Roman Catholic message. The mission's particular concern with proverbs ultimately resulted in a collection of over one thousand 'proverbionan papiamentu' (Anon. [= Nic. van Meeteren ?] 1946), presented in alphabetical order and in other respects indiscriminately put together.

By that time, however, the interest in recording the oral tradition had become a tangible need and was no longer primarily nourished by religious motives. From the 1920s on this tradition was rapidly undermined and replaced by modern means of communication. This actually constituted but one of the many sweeping consequences of the rapid socio-economic and cultural changes that the arrival of the oil-refineries on Curaçao, between 1915 and 1918, and on Aruba, between 1924 and 1932, triggered. In 1937 a father of the Dominican Order, M.D. Latour, warned that,

'it was high time to record the remnants [of the texts from the oral tradition], for any delay entailed that soon there would be no more authorities and good story-tellers left.' (*Amigoe di Curaçao*, May 1, 1937)<sup>3</sup>

Latour set himself to record Anansi stories and published over two dozen of *kuentanan di Nanzi* in the direct predecessor of the *New West Indian Guide*, viz. *de West-Indische Gids* (1937-1940). Unfortunately he did so in Dutch, forgetting (?) to leave us the original versions in Papiamentu. As Latour certainly did not favour the moral of the stories (on which Latour 1948), this missionary's concern for a dying tradition was clearly not motivated by religious interests in the first place.

His contributions to the *West Indische Gids* will partly have been a response to a particular academic demand from the colonial mother country for articles on the folklore and oral tradition from its Caribbean territo-

<sup>3</sup>Originally in Dutch: '[...] het hoog tijd werd om de laatste brokstukken [van mondeling overgeleverde teksten] te verzamelen, want wie nog langer wacht, zal spoedig vergeefs naar kenners en goede vertellers zoeken.' This and other translations by present author.

ries. The volumes of those years contain an extraordinary number of articles about Afro-Caribbean cultural phenomena in Surinam and the Dutch Antilles. However, in addition, or, perhaps in the first place, a certain local distrust of contemporary developments and of strong European socio-cultural influences - especially of a non-religious kind - also underscored the necessity to record the Afro-Antillean folk-lore and oral tradition before they would be washed away completely. Without succumbing to a romanticized view of the Afro-Antillean past and heritage, father Latour, and after him, father Paul Brenneker, Elis Juliana, Nicolaas van Meeteren, Antoine Maduro, May Henriquez, René Rosalia, Rose Mary Allen and Mario Dijkhoff - to mention the best known - dedicated years to careful recording of the 'remnants' in writing and/or on tape. Their activities resulted in quite some socio-historical, anthropological, linguistic and lexicographical publications.<sup>4</sup>

The distrust which initially accompanied the more or less academic interest in the gradually disappearing oral tradition and folklore was motivated by van Meeteren as follows.

[Those who are genuinely interested] do not look down upon the old cultural manifestations as if they were threadbare clothes that need to be replaced by new ones as soon as possible; they do not see them as belonging to a backward people, but try to press far into the soul of that group to investigate if they, despite years of isolation and, on our islands, also of enslavement, do not possess something valuable, in order to protect this against a definite ruination and to preserve it for posterity. In our times of high-speed traffic and cinemas the destruction of old morales and values takes place surprisingly quickly: a few decades suffice to annihilate an old culture, while it takes centuries to build a new one. [...]

Therefore, it is high time to record and to preserve for posterity the little that is left on our islands of old customs and habits, traditions, stories and national costumes, but, more particularly, we should try and retain whatever has a spiritual value and of which we can be certain that it has grown out of the people in due course of time.' (Van Meeteren 1977 [1947]: 15/6)<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>For their publications in the field of folklore and the oral tradition see the bibliography. Except for Henriquez (1988 and 1991), which are concerned with the traditional Jewish-Sephardic use of Papiamentu, and Dijkhoff (1991), which deals with proverbs from Aruba, the publications virtually all cover the Afro-Antillean oral tradition only.

<sup>5</sup>Originally in Dutch: '[De werkelijk belangstellenden] zien niet met verachting neer op oude cultuurvormen als op een versleten kledingstuk, dat men zoo

As by the middle of this century many, if not most of the older Afro-Curaçaoan cultural manifestations were disappearing or had already disappeared, it became evident that the remnants should be captured in writing, especially in order to retain the 'virtuous' aspects. Not only Latour, but also Van Meeteren could be very explicit in what was worth retaining and what should be improved upon.<sup>6</sup> However, disapproval - in all probability an acceptable reason to ignore folk culture in earlier decades - did not imply anymore that it should not be recorded in writing and, somewhat later, on tape. It did imply that it should be heavily commented on and be discredited when necessary. Written recordings in the 1930s and 1940s show this tendency most clearly.<sup>7</sup> In the course of the following decades this explicit 'debunking' gradually becomes less pronounced and virtually disappears - as in the case of Allen, Dijkhoff, Henriquez, Juliana and Maduro. As such this is indicative of the gradual emancipation of the Afro-Antillean people and their life-styles. Wider, unbiased acceptance should also partly be attributed to the requirements of scientific studies, such as is the case in Hoetink (1958), a socio-historical study of 19th-century Curaçao society and example-setting in many respects. However, up to this very moment, an underlying motive for research in the local folklore may be particularly the assumption that something valuable can be learned for our present times and that these valuable aspects require special attention - see, for an example, Boelbaai 1990:4.

After the Second World War, disdain for the oral tradition and folklore may gradually have been replaced by a more detached approach and ultimately by a fairly favourable assessment, it has taken decades to hesitantly value the oral tradition as an art-form, viz. as a specific realisation of literature.

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spoedig mogelijk door een nieuwe moet vervangen, zij zien die vormen niet als behorende tot een achterlijke massa, maar trachten door te dringen tot de ziel van de groep om te onderzoeken of zij, niettegenstaande jaren van afzondering en op onze eilanden ook van knechting, op cultureel gebied niets waardevols bezit, om deze te beschermen tegen een wissen ondergang en voor het nageslacht te bewaren. De vernietiging van alle oude waarden gaat in onze dagen van snelverkeer en bioscoop verbazend snel: een paar decennia is voldoende om een oude cultuur weg te vagen, terwijl een nieuw opbouwen eeuwen vereischt. [...]

Het is daarom hoog tijd, dat het weinige, wat er op onze eilanden nog over is aan traditie, overleveringen, sprookjes, oude kleederdrachten en gebruiken worden vastgelegd en voor het nageslacht bewaard, maar vooral dient getracht om alles waarvan met zekerheid kan worden gezegd, dat het een historisch gegroeide, uit het volk geboren, geestelijke waarde is, te handhaven.'

<sup>6</sup>See particularly Van Meeteren 1977 [1947]: 74, 45/6, 186, 190/1, 196.

<sup>7</sup>This is evident in De Pool 1935, on which Broek 1988/9.

In the context of this article 'literature' is considered to refer to those texts - in writing or orally handed down - that are presented and/or received as such at a particular time, at a particular place by a particular group of people - for details see Broek 1993b and 1994].

Arguing from their point of view, neither father Latour nor Van Meerteren nor any of the other researchers mentioned so far were recording 'literature' while working on the conservation of the oral tradition in writing. The oral tradition was one manifestation of the Afro-Curaçaoan way of life that was vanishing. As such it required their attention, while their activities satisfied particular anthropological, historical or linguistic interests and requirements. Their 'concept of literature' - i.e. the idea(l)s with reference to the nature and function of literature - would not allow such texts as the Anansi-stories, the *charadanan* (riddles) or the *tambú*- and harvest songs to be valued as having any literary qualities.

The first, minor references to the oral tradition as appertaining to the realm of literature date from the early 1940s, viz. Engels (1942) and Man (1944). Engels - an influential artist, poet and editor of the literary magazine *De Stoep* (1940-1951) - thinks of the Anansi-stories, work- and tumbasongs in terms of 'the first manifestations of literature in Curaçao' (Engels 1942: 3), but fails to be more detailed or to give any detailed examples. De Man - a Dutch radio journalist who stayed in Curaçao during the last two of the war years - is very definite about the high quality of the music and the songtexts on the island and speaks of *folk-art* (see Broek 1993c for particulars). He is not more detailed either, but, by speaking of folk art, he roughly indicated the framework within which the oral tradition would be assessed the following decades, viz. a manifestation of art, indeed, but then of the *folk*, the common Afro-Antillean people. In the fifties this idea would be subjected to some refinement, which, however, has not lost much of its range yet.

Cola Debrot - (b. Bonaire 1902 - d. Netherlands 1981), influential author of prose, poetry and literary criticism both in the Netherlands Antilles and in the Netherlands - published the first comprehensive article on the multilingual literature from the Netherlands Antilles. He did so in the opening issue of the literary magazine *Antilliaanse Cahiers* (1955 - 1967), of which he was one of the editors. The article was an extended version of an earlier essay (Debrot 1953), which in its turn had been a speech on Dutch Antillean literature which he delivered various times in the early 1950s. He was to rewrite this essay several times, also in English (Debrot 1964), and for the last time in 1977. He contributed the entries on literature to the first encyclopedia of the Netherlands Antilles (Hoetink [ed.] 1969), which were, after Debrot's death, expanded quite in line with his views for the second edition of the encyclopedia (De Palm [ed.] 1985). In all, for over thirty-five years this writing of Debrot's was

to guide literary criticism on the multilingual literary output from the Dutch Antilles.

At first sight Debrot seems to embrace the oral tradition in Papiamentu as a literary phenomenon of quite some import. Debrot chooses to work with 'the conventional distinction between folk-literature and literature as an art-form' (Debrot 1955: 6).<sup>8</sup> As, except for Engels and De Man, hardly anyone on the islands had given it a thought, there was little reason to speak of 'conventional' in the context of the islandic literature. This rather manipulative trait characterizes Debrot's discussion of the oral tradition as a whole. Debrot continues by distinguishing several categories of popular literature and gives examples of each of them - many from the twentieth century. Rounding off this part of his essay, he remarks,

'Folk literature, that *at present has fallen into a state of disgrace and gradually turns into the genre of popular amusement*, flourished in the days before emancipation in 1863.'  
(Debrot 1955: 20; my emphasis, AGB)<sup>9</sup>

Hereby Debrot gracefully disqualifies the examples from the twentieth century he had just given and turns the oral tradition into something practically non-existent. It is all very fine to state that the oral tradition flourished more than a hundred years earlier, but little is actually known, as virtually nothing was recorded in those pre-twentieth-century days. So actual assessment is impossible. The 'remnants' of yonder days are allegedly fine examples of folk-art, or rather, are indicative of an extinct 'treasure' which may be seen as an art-form. The art of the people has actually been replaced by the literary art which is written - in the Dutch Antilles in Spanish, English, Dutch and Papiamentu - and which is indeed available. Consequently, the remaining and greater part of Debrot's lengthy essay is dedicated to this literary writing.

This reluctance to fully accept the oral tradition, including modern realizations, as a literary phenomenon is easily discernable in the literary critical practice of the following forty years.<sup>10</sup> It is not far-fetched to state that by literary scholars and critics *lip service* has been paid to the

<sup>8</sup>In the English version Debrot speaks of 'an elementary distinction' (Debrot 1964: 3).

<sup>9</sup>Originally in Dutch: 'De bloei van de volksliteratuur, die *op het ogenblik ongetwijfeld in déconfiture verkeert en langzaam overgaat in het genre populaire amusementsliteratuur*, moet men zoeken in de tijd van voor de emancipatie in 1863.'

<sup>10</sup>Besides Debrot's own essays, see, for instance, Martinus Arion 1958, Labega 1959, de Palm 1968, Lim (ed.) 1968, Habibe 1970, Laufer (ed.) 1971, Laufer 1976, Joubert 1976(a), Wal and Van Wel 1980, Palm 1985, Heuvel and Van Wel 1989.

oral tradition. Critics tend to state that there used to be a folk-art, at times give a rhyme and riddle, and a story or two and then continue discussing in more detail the literary art in writing. No analysis of rhythm or imagery, of themes and motifs, or any other literary aspect has been presented. Except for the two examples discussed below, no well-documented publications of primary texts have appeared. This is most evident when perusing the numerous pages of the literary, socio-cultural and related magazines the Dutch Leeward Islands have produced since the early forties: *De Stoep*, *Lux*, *Gydelcra*, *Simadán*, *Antillano*, *Eldorado*, *Social y Cultura*, *Antilliaanse Cahiers*, *Christoffel*, *Cadushi*, *Pika*, *Culturele Kroniek*, *Vitó*, *Kambio*, *Watapana*, *Ruku*, *Kitoki*, *Brindis*, *Krow* and *Kristòf*. Only rarely would a critic actually deny Debrot's views.<sup>11</sup> On the whole, literary criticism would not defy his assertion and would just state, generally without providing any tangible argument, that there had been a folk-art or -literature and it would next leave behind a few examples from the oral tradition.

Nevertheless, some consolidation and standardization did take place, but the folk art as a whole was to remain within the shadow of literary writing - up to today and despite changes in nomenclature. The term 'folk literature' slowly fell into oblivion in the course of the 1960s and 1970s, and was gradually replaced by the term 'oral literature', while more recently the term 'orature' is at times used. This verbal change is to be attributed to international discussions in this field and less to a substantial and tangible rise in the literary status as such.

As for the consolidation of oral literature, in 1970 Elis Juliana published a substantial collection of verbally recorded stories of old women and men from Curaçao. Repetitions, striking phrases, hesitations, archaic words, imagery and tunes form an integral part of this appealing collection. He had been working on this collection since the early 1960s and was actually acting up to what Debrot had only suggested. With the aid of the Dutch Foundation for Cultural Cooperation between Suriname and the Netherlands Antilles (Sticusa), a Dutch literary publisher was found willing to publish his collection, which is completely in Papiamentu. A thousand copies were printed, which were sold in the following decade. As no reprint has appeared on the market, the book has become

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<sup>11</sup>Such as Zielinski (1965), when he states, 'I think that Cola Debrot has gone mad. [...] Cola's folk literature does not exist. The only valuable traditions we have in the Antilles are the Anansi-stories and one or two songs that has stood the tooth of ages.' (Ik geloof dat Cola Debrot op hol geslagen is. [...] Cola's volksliteratuur bestaat niet. De enige overleveringen van waarde die wij op de Antillen hebben, dat zijn de Nanzi-verhalen en een enkel lied dat de tijd weerstaan heeft). Zielinski's is a rare case, indeed.

a collector's item rather than a readily available classic of oral literature in Papiamentu.

In the late 1970s the same Dutch organisation that backed Juliana, Sticusa, also provided funds to highlight a collection of a dozen songs in Papiamentu that were composed in the early forties by three young men - Jules de Palm, Pierre Lauffer and René de Rooy - and who together took on the name of Julio Perrenal. The songs (poems) and the creative process that brought them into being are quite in line with the oral tradition. Not surprisingly the songs were not considered to have any literary status at the time of their origin and this would not change during the following decades (Broek 1990). However, since this publication about Julio Perrenal by De Palm (1979), these songs/poems, more than any other, old or more recent, example from the oral tradition, have been awarded a place within the literary realm in Papiamentu.

Besides these two tangible examples, there is, indeed, a collection of Anansi-stories by Nilda Pinto, even dating from just before the first version of Debrot's essay on Dutch Antillean literature. It has been reprinted various times and, after the publication of Debrot's essay in *Antilliaanse Cahiers* (1955), it became the most solid point of reference in literary criticism where oral literature is concerned. The collection has even been translated into English (Geerdink-Jesurun Pinto 1972). Nevertheless nobody has bothered so far to edit an edition with all Anansi-stories available on tape, in manuscript, or published one way or another, neither has any institution shown the initiative to back necessary research to accomplish this. It should also be taken into account that Pinto's collection was the result in writing of a series of programmes for children on the local radio (Curom). Nilda Pinto does not seem to have had the idea of being at work in the literary field. She presented her personal versions of the age-old Anansi stories, without bothering to record in detail and as accurately as possible versions she had heard from people her senior in many years. The Anansi-stories had fully lost the function they originally had in the days of slavery (on which Schweitz 1980, De Roo 1977, Muller 1977 and others) and which they seem to have lost quite rapidly after the abolition of slavery (on which Broek 1988). The Anansi-stories, like most other old-time stories that were not lost, had become children's reading matter<sup>12</sup>, of which the literariness more often than not was of little or no importance.

On Aruba the Afro-Caribbean heritage is quite limited. Before the influx of labourers from the smaller West Indian islands at the end of the

<sup>12</sup>Such as are to be found in Garmers 1955, [1956], [1957] and 1960. Also see Rutgers (1988: 243-265) on texts from the oral tradition as children's reading matter.



1930s and following decades the population primarily consisted of Indian descendents and of descendents of miscegenation with little or no African or Afro-Caribbean blood. From the early 1960s on, the Indian heritage would be emphasized, especially for political reasons. To distinguish itself from Curaçao, the centre of all political decisions, and to claim relative autonomy - that is to say, within the Royal Kingdom of the Netherlands - Aruba stated to treasure its Indian roots, and, in its extremer form, highlighted ethnic differences (see Alofs 1990: 520, 522). In the wake of this political claim the Indian folk-lore could not escape attention. However, these Indian roots would primarily guide new literary texts - also see hereafter - rather than lead to attempts to record and publish these very roots as scientifically justifiably as possible for literary purposes. A defence of the Indian oral tradition as an art-form, as oral literature, is, indeed, hard to find.

The oral tradition may not have gained the same status as the literary art in writing, in the course of the post-war decades it has been allotted a place in the shadow of literary writing. It would be a violation of facts and observations to attribute a more prominent place to oral literature within the literary realm in Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao in the course of the post-war decades. The limited appraisal and esteem seem to have been carried by the following, tentatively formulated factors.

- The replacement of old morales and values, customs and traditions by others was inescapable. The new socio-cultural patterns would not be embraced indiscriminately, as was pointed out earlier, but virtually never would a critique of contemporary developments entail a passionate plea for the return to old times, which could have incorporated a more vehement appeal to treasure the oral tradition. The oral tradition had been embedded in socio-cultural structures which few, if any, of the Antillean people were dying to see revived.<sup>13</sup> Industrialisation of the islands, on the other hand, provided ample opportunities to improve one's socio-economic position. Social mobility implied - as it did and does anywhere else - the loss of behavioural patterns of former days and/or of lower social strata and the acquisition of new patterns. Conservation of old manifestations of the oral tradition must have been one of the behavioural patterns of which most people stripped themselves (which does not imply that new manifestations of the oral tradition would not arise either; see hereafter).
- The first impulses to a reappraisal of the oral tradition as an art-form also seem to have been fed, not so much by a genuine con-

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<sup>13</sup>Except some of the former white creole elite, as is apparent from De Pool 1935, on which Broek 1989/90.

cern for the oral tradition as such, but by the desire to oppose Dutch cultural influences and Dutch disdain for Papiamentu (and its speakers). Especially since the early fifties and far into the 1970s a well-structured and institutionalized attempt to strengthen Dutch cultural manifestations - language, literature, education - on the Antillean islands is discernible (Oostindie 1989; Helman/De Roo 1988). Officially a policy of 'exchange' of cultures was defended and, indeed, increasingly room was given to promote local cultural art-forms (which explains the opportunities to publish Juliana's and De Palm's books in the Netherlands in the 1970s<sup>14</sup>). Initially, however, while the written literature in Papiamentu was evidently limited, the oral tradition seems to have been highlighted to add some weight in 'the bartering game'. This support from the oral tradition gradually loses its pertinent character because the body of literary writing in Papiamentu increases in the post-war decades and is given some local institutional backing. Besides, writing in Papiamentu as such came closer to the Western ideal of literature, which in its turn was fed by the success of literary writing in Dutch on the island.

- A third factor may have been that, although the oral tradition used to be an adequate and as such a treasured means to relate to particular socio-cultural and economic patterns of earlier days, the written forms of literature were experienced as better vehicles to cope with post-war reality and its multiplicity of new mores and values. This seems to have been particularly true of the middle class group of readers and of the intellectual elite - however limited their numbers - that decided what was and was not to be valued as literature.
- A fourth factor of importance must have been the 'discovery' of the oral tradition as an almost inexhaustable source for the development of a written literature in Papiamentu. The various realisations of the oral tradition in Papiamentu as such - so with or without the qualification of 'literature' - have been of vital importance for literary writing in the vernacular, especially in Curaçao and Aruba. Post-war literary writing in Papiamentu is inconceivable without the 'exploitation' of the language register of the people in the countryside as known from their storytelling and singing. The rhythm of musical subgenres such as the tambú and the tumba formed the un-

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<sup>14</sup>The little attention and money that was dedicated by the Sticusa to the oral tradition, would be allotted to the oral tradition on Curaçao rather than on Aruba or Bonaire. This is indicative of the dominant role that Curaçao played in many ways and which fed the separatist-movement on Aruba - cf. earlier remarks on Aruba.

wavering basis of a series of invaluable poems (on which Van Putte 1989 and 1992, also see Joubert 1976 and Muller 1976). Old nurseries settled in engaging poetry, and so did the vivid and at times sharply edged imagery from the *tambú* and the *banderitas*<sup>15</sup>.

Existing stories and, on Aruba, Indian mythology were retold in writing and presented to readers. The mournful tone of dirges sung at funerals, everyday euphemisms deployed in moments of discord (on which Clemencia 1989) and even expressive slanging matches found their way into literary writing in Papiamentu of generally appreciated high quality. Deploying the oral tradition as beacons, as starting point, as moulds, as continuous threads or even as backbones of writing in Papiamentu seems to be indicative of the attitude which said, generally silently, that actually by cultivating the oral tradition into particular forms of writing 'literature as an art-form' is created.<sup>16</sup> It seems that the linguistic, rhythmic and aesthetic heritage which formed the oral tradition could not be a literary aim in itself and a fruitful source of inspiration at the same time.

However, in the process of revaluation of the oral tradition something else has been involved as well. The remnants of the oral tradition may not have been attributed substantial literary qualities and functions and, on the other hand, these may have inspired a substantial literary output, but all this does not mean that the old-time realisations of the oral tradition, or what is left of it, do not yet function anymore in other ways, so outside the realm of literary appreciation and interpretation. The oral tradition still functions as the body of texts researchers of various scientific disciplines thrive on (see above). Besides, quite some stories from the oral tradition have found their way into books for young children (also cf. above) and various old-time ring-games and -songs have retained a place in the children's playworld. What is more, especially a fairly large number of old-time songs have been subjected to a process of musical

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<sup>15</sup> *Banderitas* - literally: small flag - are aphoristic or critical, rhyming statements, generally of a few lines, more often than not referring to topical issues, regularly based on lines from a popular *tambú* song. These statements were written or printed on small coloured flags, especially at the turn of the year (which was also the *tambú* season). The habit of doing so seems to have originated after emancipation and lasted until the last decade before the Second World War.

<sup>16</sup> This, however, does not imply that the texts are meant to be read only. On the contrary, especially those texts that are a cultivation of aspects from the oral tradition lend themselves admirably to the purpose of life performance (radio, television, book presentations, cultural manifestations, private gatherings and the like). More often than not these very texts are better known on the islands by such performances than by reading.

reinterpretations - up to this very moment. Not only have particular musical subgenres like the tumba and the tambú - both where the text and the music are concerned - been subjected to further development, but old texts are continually reinterpreted and given new arrangements. Having lost their traditional contexts and function the texts are clad in a present-day jacket, recorded on CD and presented live at concert-halls, open air manifestations, hotels, public and private parties, at official openings, on radio and TV. Such presentations with a dominant recreational and at times a mildly critical element are widely appreciated and generally felt to be *di nos* (ours, i.e. of Afro-Antillean or of Aruban heritage).

These popular and modern realisations of the oral tradition - more appealing to the general public than a stilted and more or less academic presentation as oral 'literature' in print could be - have not as yet found a wide acceptance as a particular form of *literature*. Yet, these past few years, more specifically in Curaçao, the oral tradition in its present-day realisations and its performers - who generally do not belong to the higher socio-economic strata of society - have at times been credited with meritorious *literary* qualities.

In November 1992 a symposium was dedicated to the texts and music of the extremely popular composer and pianist Rignald Recordino, leader of the band Doble R. The speakers - amongst whom three literary authors, viz. Elis Juliana, Frank Martinus Arion and Maria Diwan - did not shrink away from mild criticism but were generally applauding Recordino's qualities and did not deny his texts' literary merits. That same year, during the Third International Caribbean Women Writers' Conference on Curaçao, a woman-singer from the island, Petronilia (Petoï) Coco, was awarded a prize for her numerous contributions to the tradition of oral literature. At the occasion her achievements were emphatically praised as having 'literary' qualities. The same conference yielded a book publication on womanhood in Curaçao. One of the articles is a deliberate reassessment of the tambú-songs by Elia Isenia as a highly artistic, literary achievement (Clemencia 1992).

This tendency is given quite some institutional backing by governmental organizations such as the Instituto Nashonal di Idioma (formerly, Sede di Papiamentu) and the Department of Culture. The more recent governmental policy in the literary and cultural arena, as well as elsewhere, tends to have populist traits: at least, the three examples corroborate this impression. But on the other hand, this tendency is not free from an influence that also played a role in the fifties. The demand for literary texts in Papiamentu has increased considerably during this past decade for a reason quite different from the one in the fifties: the local vernacular is given a place in the educational system. One of the major objections to the use of Papiamentu at schools is the lack of sufficient literary texts in

the vernacular. The production in literary writing in Papiamentu remains limited, certainly does not cover the demand. Recent attention shifting to the oral tradition somewhat more than it did also seems to be fed by this practical exigency: there does not seem to be enough literature in the native tongue, but that is because we tend to overlook the oral tradition, i.e. our oral literature in Papiamentu.

Besides, under the influence of the international feminist movement and of related theories in literature, the 'demand' by some critics for women 'writers' in Papiamentu has increased considerably. Again, the number of women writers is limited, and so is their production, and, what is more, their work does not necessarily yield standards that are ideologically compatible with feminism. The oral tradition and its women performers, indeed, do provide alternatives.

All this, however, cannot take away the image of an oral tradition in Papiamentu that has been given far less literary critical attention than literary writing in Papiamentu these past fifty years. On Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao the transfer from an oral tradition to an oral literature has been a reluctant one so far.

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